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ABSTRACT

An extensive study of sexism in children's books was made based on the rationale that if society is committed to changing sexist attitudes, these changes will appear in the tools used to inculcate children. For the study, a random sample of one hundred trade books for each of two periods, 1950-53 and 1970-73, was drawn from the Library of Congress catalogs for those years. Results indicated that only a minute increase, .58%, in female visibility in the text and a modest increase, 16.8%, in illustrations occurred in children's books in the early 1970s as compared to the early 1950s. Males still outnumbered females by a proportion of 63.4% to 36.5% in terms of texts of children's books and 56.9% to 43% in terms of illustrations during the 1970-73 period. Adult male characters were better represented than adult female characters in occupational roles in both periods. In both periods, occupations of male characters were slightly better distributed relative to males in the real population than were occupations of adult female characters. The percentage of instances in which females participated in female-stereotyped activities increased between the two periods in both text and illustration. (MKM)

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PICTURE BOOK SEXISM: TWO STEPS FORWARD AND ONE STEP BACK?

Helen G. Koss

"You've come a long way, Baby," the commercials of a leading cigarette company inform us. The inference is that females in this day and age are free of the barriers and inhibitions that were long a part of our mother's and grandmother's life style.

How far have we really come? Certainly we can note changes in attitudes towards sexism in our society. Legislation exists that attacks discrimination based on sex. Our vocabulary has expanded to accommodate such terms as "chairperson" and "salesperson" and the press features women working at hard hat jobs, presiding over corporate board meetings and maneuvering tractor-trailer rigs.

The question seems to be how pervasive these changes really are -- whether we are actually changing our traditional view of the male-female relationship, or whether the vocabulary and press releases are merely veneer that are not indicative of a wide-spread change in attitudes toward the traditional view of male-female roles.

One of the areas chosen for research to determine whether we are, in truth, laying aside long-standing sexist biases is the examination of materials used to educate children. The rationale for researching these materials seems to rest on this premise: If our society is in fact committed to changing sexist attitudes, these changes will appear in the tools used to inculcate our children -- films, textbooks, filmstrips and leisure reading materials.

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Leisure reading materials, the books people read for pleasure, are a particularly good barometer of societal concerns since they show a special relationship to the social milieu in which they are written. Writers are affected by the world around them and their interpretation of this world is transmitted to their readers. Some writers' interpretations of life expand to include current ideas and social issues which the authors hope will be responsible for promoting changes in the thoughts and attitudes of their readers.

Something of this sort occurred in the 1950's and 1960's when writers like Francis Ashley-Montague[1] and Simone de Beauvour[2] explored the status of the female in our society. The topic proved fascinating to other writers who responded by presenting women fictional characters in perspectives not widely seen in previous literature.

Experience with children's books has shown that changes wrought in adult writing filters through to children's literature several years after its introduction in books for adults. Since the period between the 1950's and the 1970's witnessed a variety of changes in perceptions of the male and female in adult literature, it seemed reasonable that some evidence of these changes would be noted in children's books over this twenty year period.

These assumptions led this author to an extensive study of sexism in children's books.[3] For the study, a random sample of one hundred trade books for each of two periods, 1950-1953 (Period I) and 1970-1973 (Period II) was drawn from the Library of Congress Catalog: Subjects 1950-1954[4] and Library of Congress Catalog: Subjects 1970-1974[5].

Among the questions posed in the research were: Has there been a difference in visibility of the female in children's books of the early 1970's as compared to the early 1950's? Are their roles as varied as those of women in the population? Are they as varied as those of males? Is children's participation in activities more or less sex-stereotyped in books of the later period when compared with the early period?

Results show that only a minute increase, .58 percent, in female visibility in text, and a modest increase, 16.8% in illustrations, was apparent in children's books in the early 1970's as compared to the early 1950's. This would indicate that it is the artists rather than the writers who are becoming increasingly aware of strengthening the position of the female in children's books by making them more visible to the child reader.

Even with this moderate improvement in the number of females shown in illustration in the early seventies, one is struck by the fact that the proportion of males to females in this period is still weighted toward male representation. At a time when females comprised slightly more than 51 percent of the population of the United States,[6] males outnumber females by a proportion of 63.4 percent to 36.5 percent in terms of texts of children's books and 56.9 percent to 43 percent in terms of illustration during this 1970-73 period.

Thus, it seems apparent that equal representation of females in relation to males had not yet appeared in children's books of the early 1970's in spite of the women's liberation movement, equal rights legislation, affirmative action for non-discrimination in terms of sex, and increased attention to the female in the mass media and literature of this period and earlier.

Data on the number of male and female main characters in sample books do not indicate a parallel with the data on numbers of characters. The number of main male characters noted in both text and illustration, showed a slight decline in the early seventies as compared with the early fifties. In text the decline was 8.1 percent and in illustration 5.3 percent. At the same time, the number of female main characters in the 1970's showed a 133 percent increase in terms of both text and illustration. However, even with this spectacular increase in female main characters, they represent slightly less than 30 percent of the total number of main characters in the early 1970's.

This point is not made to disparage the improvement in female visibility as main characters in the 1970-73 period, but it does indicate how poorly females as main characters fared in early fifties when six times as many males as females appeared as main characters. Apparently authors and illustrators in the seventies have begun to view the female as an active enough participant in life to be able to feature her more often as a protagonist in children's books, but equal representation which reflects population distribution did not exist in books for young children in the early 1970's.

The conclusions reached on data analysis of the occupational diversity of characters in relation to occupational diversity of the real population for each sex in each period as shown in Bureau of Census and Bureau of Labor Statistics eleven occupational categories indicated that adult characters' occupations in sample books for both periods studied did not show the same occupational profile as that of the corresponding sex in the real population during the same period.

A heavy proportion of males in both periods were found in categories in which similar concentrations of males in the real population did not appear. For example, substantial proportions of male characters were found in the operatives and service workers divisions which is accounted for by the number of policemen, firemen, postmen, truck drivers, and delivery men who appeared in sample books. The professional/technical category also showed a heavy proportion of male characters which was not borne out by employment statistics. This can be accounted for by the frequency with which male characters appeared as circus performers, doctors, musicians, and clergymen. Both periods were notable for poor representation of male characters in the skilled trades, law, engineering, teaching, and the business world.

Female character occupational distribution was notable in both periods for a high proportion of females in the professional/technical category which was not supported by employment statistics for employed females. This can be explained by the large proportion of female characters who appeared in the roles of teachers and nurses, traditional occupations for women. [illegible] two females in the two periods appeared in the role of a doctor. No female characters appeared as bus drivers, cooks, bank officials, or in managerial roles.

In both periods, parents in a family were portrayed in apparel that was designed to indicate the parent's role. Fathers shown returning from work were most often shown in a business suit although no other occupational reference in text or illustration provided a clue as to the nature of their work. Adult females in family settings were often

portrayed wearing an apron, engaged in an activity related to the kitchen. In such instances, no references to outside employment were made.

A substantial difference can be noted in the number of employed females as compared to males in the early fifties. In the texts of the 1950's, 124 occupations were noted, only twelve of which, 9.7 percent, were noted as female roles. Illustrations in the same period show 190 adult characters in occupational roles. Only seventeen, 8.9 percent, were females. In the real population during this period, 29 percent of the employed persons in the United States were female.

Sample books from the early seventies showed changes in the proportions of employed persons by sex. A substantial decrease can be noted in the number of male characters in occupational roles, while a marked increase has taken place in terms of females in occupational roles. Eighty male and thirty-six female characters were noted in occupational roles in the texts of sample books for this period. This 69 percent male, 31 percent female, representation for the 1970s compares to a 90 percent male and 9.7 percent female representation during the early fifties. An almost identical pattern of change for the early seventies was noted in males and females in occupations roles portrayed in illustrations in sample books for the two periods.

Thus, it appears from the results of this study that adult male characters were better represented than adult female characters in occupational roles in both periods. Occupations of male characters also enjoyed a slightly better distribution relative to males in the real population in the eleven major occupational categories than did adult female characters in either period.

Although the number of female characters in occupational roles increased substantially in the early seventies as compared to the early fifties, there was not a corresponding improvement in the variety of occupations for females. Teacher, librarian, and nurse, traditionally thought of as women's roles, accounted for more than one-half of those in the professional/technical category which in itself made up 66.6 percent of the total of female characters in occupational roles in texts of Period II sample books.

Results of the study showed that children of both sexes appeared far more frequently in activities that were not stereotypical of their sex in sample books of the two periods studied. In each period males outnumbered females as participants in activities by substantial margins. In both periods, females were more often found in female-stereotyped activities than were males in male-stereotyped activities. In fact, the percentage of instances in which females participated in female-stereotyped activities increased between the two periods in both text and illustration. Activities conforming to stereotype for females were 16.1 percent of female activities in the 1950s and 28.6 percent in the 1970's in terms of text. A similar increase was noted in terms of illustration.

The comparison of sexism in fictional books for young children published in Period I, the early 950's, and Period II, the early 1970's, seems to indicate that a change in sexism did occur, but it was neither uniform nor consistent. Females improved their visibility in the seventies through a better ratio of female characters to male, a greater frequency of females in main character roles, and increased numbers of adult female characters in occupational roles.

Sexism, or the lack of it, does not, however, depend solely on the presence of one sex in relation to the other. It is also concerned with stereotyping which prescribes patterns of behavior and lifestyle which limit the freedom and potential of the individual. In this respect, adult females in the seventies' books showed little or no improvement. Although the increased number of adult female characters noted as employed persons compared favorably with the percentage of employed females in the real population for the same period, their occupational roles were not as varied as females in the real population.

In contrast to the stereotyping of adult female characters in occupations in both periods, results of this study indicated that children of both sexes participated most frequently in activities that did not conform to stereotyped activities for their sex. This encouraging note does not, however, reveal the full picture. Although female children were found most frequently in activities not stereotyped for their sex, they participated more frequently in stereotyped activities than did males in either period. Also notable was the fact that the percentage of participation of female child characters in female-stereotyped activities actually rose in the seventies when the overall frequency of female participations remained relatively stable in comparison to the early fifties.

Have we come a long way in eradicating sexism from our society? If children's books are any indicator, the answer might be, "We've come a long way in promoting an awareness of the nature of sexism." Now let's translate awareness into overt behavior which eliminates sexism at home, at school and in the marketplace. Then we can say we've come a long way.

1 Francis Ashley-Montague, Natural Superiority of Women (New York: Macmillan,), 1953.

2 Simone de Beauvoir, Second Sex (New York: Knopf, 1953).

3 Helen Koss, "A Comparison of Sexism in Trade Bo_ks for Primary Children 1950-1953 and 1970-1973," (unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1978).

4 Library of Congress, Library of Congress Catalog: Subjects 1950-1954, Vol. IV, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956).

5 Library of Congress, Library of Congress Catalog: Subjects 1970-1974, Vol. VIII, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976.

6 United States Department of Commerce, Statistical Abstract of the United States (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), p. 36.